

United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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In Reply To:

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February 1, 2007

EMAIL TRANSMISSION – 2/1/07
Information Bulletin No. MT-2007-016

To: State Management Team

From: Director, External Affairs

Subject: Briefing Statement Revisions

DD: September 23, 2007

It is time again to review and update the Montana/Dakotas BLM Briefing Statements. These briefs are an invaluable source of public information about highly visible and sometimes controversial programs within our organization. They are used frequently by the Secretary of the Interior, congressional offices, news media, and interest groups affected by BLM programs.

A table of contents showing the date of the most recent review/update is attached, as well as a copy of each briefing statement for your program area. When deciding to add or delete a particular briefing statement, keep in mind that the briefing book is intended to focus only on issues that are highly visible and/or controversial, not on general programs.

Review the briefing papers carefully and completely rather than just appending with the latest information. Briefing statements should be concise; they may be edited for length and clarity. Also, please make sure the correct contact person is listed.

Please send a copy of your update, recommendation for deletion, or “no change” response for each statement pertaining to your area to Ann Boucher (MT912) by February 23, 2007. If you have any questions, please contact Ann at 406-896-5011.

Signed by: Greg Albright, Acting

Authenticated by: Ann Boucher

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UNDAUNTED STEWARDSHIP

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Undaunted Stewardship Program Description and Status

ISSUES:

Background: The Undaunted Stewardship concept came from Montana's ranching and agricultural community. It was initiated to recognize the stewardship of private landowners that has resulted in many areas along the Lewis and Clark Trail remaining undeveloped and closely resembling what Lewis and Clark saw during their expedition through the state. Another aspect of Undaunted Stewardship is to develop on-the-ground projects with private landowners that will further enhance the natural resources along the trail. This program, working with private landowners, develops management plans and interpretive kiosks. It has also identified projects to showcase outstanding land stewardship practices on 12 Montana ranches in addition to a certification program which recognizes sound grazing practices. A project scheduled for 2007 is an interpretive trail and signing project in Fort Benton, in partnership with the BLM, the City of Fort Benton and the River and Plains Society. Sixteen other organizations complete the public/private partnership. Congress has been appropriating funding for the Undaunted Stewardship program, through the BLM, since April 2001.

Program Goals:

Goal 1: To demonstrate that agriculture and environmental values can be compatible.

Goal 2: To educate people (e.g., farmers, ranchers, policymakers, and other citizens) about how voluntary, incentive-based approaches can be used to sustain and enhance the environmental, social, historical, and economic values of agricultural landscapes.

Recognition: The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation recognized the Undaunted Stewardship program with the Chairman's Award for Federal Achievement in Historic Preservation. The award, presented in Annapolis, Maryland, on May 18, 2005, cited Undaunted Stewardship as a "wonderful model for similar partnerships across the Nation."

BLM role: As a member of the executive council, BLM has helped develop agreements that:

- Lay out a methodology to prioritize and select projects for funding;
- Create the means to fund projects through Montana State University (MSU) when needed;
- Encourage the use of partnerships with other organizations to leverage available funding.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Although Undaunted Stewardship funding comes to Montana BLM, it is essentially pass-through funding. The intent is not to use this money for projects that would traditionally be funded by regular BLM appropriations. The BLM, MSU, Montana Stockgrowers, and an advisory board jointly select projects that meet the criteria of the Undaunted Stewardship initiative, which is aimed at showcasing stewardship on private lands.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The Montana Stockgrowers Association was instrumental in obtaining the Undaunted Stewardship appropriation and serves on the executive council.

Several conservation groups are involved in the process and will offer advice concerning projects along the Missouri and other rivers and streams along the Lewis and Clark Trail.

Montana State University is providing outreach and research and science assistance for project development and implementation. It is also assisting private landowners in developing management strategies.

CONTACT:

Howard Lemm, Associate State Director, (406) 896-5012

POMPEYS PILLAR NATIONAL MONUMENT INTERPRETIVE CENTER

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Construction of a new 5,700-square foot interpretive center and related infrastructure improvements are complete. Two Congressional appropriations totaling \$4.9 million made this project possible.

Additional improvements consisting of a paved ½-mile entrance road and parking lot; entrance station which can either be staffed or collect fees from an automated teller; over ¼ mile of walkways; and an amphitheater are currently under construction and will be completed this fall. The additional improvements have been funded by BLM (\$2.6 million) along with contributions from the Department of Transportation and Yellowstone County (\$400,000 CTEP grant to Pompeys Pillar Historical Association), the National Park Service (\$170,000 grant to Pompeys Pillar Historical Association), and Engineering Inc./Land Design (an in-kind contribution of design work valued at \$50,000 to Pompeys Pillar Historical Association).

ISSUES:

Pompeys Pillar National Monument was designated by the National Lewis & Clark Bicentennial Council as the site of one of only 15 Lewis & Clark signature events nationwide. The *Clark on the Yellowstone* Signature Event took place July 22 – 25, 2006, and drew an audience of 47,000. This event, in the eyes of many, was one of the finest Signature events held during the Bicentennial.

Pompeys Pillar is a 121-foot sandstone butte 28 miles northeast of Billings, Montana. The only known physical evidence of the Lewis and Clark Expedition still visible along the trail is Captain Clark's signature, which he carved into the Pillar on July 25, 1806. He recorded doing so in his journal.

The BLM purchased Pompeys Pillar November 22, 1991, for its historic significance and its interpretive and recreational potential. In 1992, the BLM constructed limited facilities for the protection of resources and the comfort and safety of visitors. Facilities included a small log contact station and a stairway to Clark's signature and the top of the Pillar. The site's designation as a national monument on January 17, 2001, was widely supported.

The Pompeys Pillar Historical Association has worked closely with BLM in the acquisition, operation and development of this site. It has also agreed to raise \$2 million to match an FY1999 \$2 million Congressional appropriation to go toward the construction of a new interpretive center. In FY2002, Congress appropriated an additional \$2.9 million for construction of the center.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

We need to remain cognizant of our ability to fund annual operation and maintenance costs. The existing fee structure is under review, with input from the Resource Advisory Council. We will need to explore all available means to provide funding to keep the center open, especially since the community has expressed a strong desire to have a year-round facility operation.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high regarding both the site itself and construction of an interpretive center. Feedback from public meetings, briefings for elected officials, and public comment letters has been generally favorable.

CONTACT:

Dick Kodeski, Pompeys Pillar National Monument Manager, (406) 896-5235

UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT INTERPRETIVE CENTER

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The community of Fort Benton proposed a new interpretive center to replace the BLM's existing visitor contact station. Congress appropriated \$2.9 million for construction of a new facility. However, BLM is concerned about long-term funding for operations, maintenance and staffing.

The BLM has nearly completed the 6,000-square foot center located on a 3.64-acre site adjacent to the Missouri River. This land will be donated to the BLM by the City of Fort Benton upon completion of the center.

ISSUES:

The need for improved visitor facilities surfaced in the late 1980s. The old 750-square foot visitor contact station in Fort Benton's downtown was a small, converted house that is more than 100 years old.

As the head of the 149-mile Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, Fort Benton is experiencing increased tourism that received a boost over the years from the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial events. The national Lewis and Clark events have ended, and the future impacts on local tourism remains to be seen. Tourism provides an economic boost to the local economy, but there is also recognition of infrastructure needs such as an improved visitor center.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM has prepared an environmental assessment that analyzes development of the visitor center. The EA was reviewed by the public and after revision, was finalized.

Split Rock Studios completed the interpretive prospectus. Meetings were held in Lewistown and Fort Benton in late June 2003 concerning interpretive themes. Explus and Mainstreet Design designed and fabricated the interpretive displays. Displays were installed in fall of 2006

Kadrmaz, Lee, and Jackson and CTA (A&E firms) completed the building design. The project was put out for bid in March 2005 and Roundtree Construction from Great Falls, Mont., was the successful bidder for construction of the building.

A groundbreaking ceremony was held June 30, 2005, and topsoil was cleared beginning July 5. The center will be completed in the fall of 2006, and an open house is planned for the middle of October. A dedication ceremony was held June 25, 2006, to coincide with the Fort Benton summer celebration events.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Local public interest is high. The concept of a new visitor center has support from both county and city officials. However, local partners have questioned the amount of local support, such as in-kind services, that will be needed to augment BLM's limited capabilities to fund operation and maintenance costs.

CONTACT:

Connie Jacobs, Upper Missouri River Breaks Interpretive Center Director, (406) 622-4020

SHEPHERD AH-NEI OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE (OHV) RECREATION AREA

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The BLM initiated travel management planning for the Shepherd Ah-Nei OHV Area during the summer of 2004 with an inventory of all roads and trails. The environmental assessment and decision record for managing off-highway vehicle travel within the OHV area was released May 13, 2005.

ISSUES:

The BLM's Shepherd Ah-Nei Recreation Area near Billings is a very popular destination for a variety of recreationists, including OHV riders. The OHV portion of Shepherd Ah-Nei was closed in April 2004 pending completion of a travel management plan and environmental assessment analyzing the effects of OHV use on the 1,063-acre area.

The Travel Management Plan and decision to reopen was released on May 13, 2005. In June the decision was appealed with a stay. The Interior Board of Land Appeals granted the stay on the decision in July 2005. The stay was lifted in September 2005 allowing the area to reopen. The Interior Board of Land Appeals has yet to rule on the appeal.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Billings Field Office continues to implement the travel management plan that was released in May 2005. Billings Field Office staff monitors the area weekly, assessing trail conditions and closing unauthorized trails. During the past several months the area has been closed for brief periods of time due to wet and muddy conditions. The area was closed for several weeks during mid to late summer 2006 because of extreme fire danger.

Parking lot improvements will be completed in the fall of 2006. Montana Conservation Corps finished two large closure efforts in June and July 2006. The entrance to the OHV area was redesigned and a new cattle guard and gate were installed in July 2006. Other improvements included an ATV/motorcycle loading and unloading ramp.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The BLM will continue to provide safe, motorized recreation opportunities while protecting natural and cultural resources.

CONTACT:

Lynn Anderson, Outdoor Recreation Planner, (406) 896-5248

BUTTE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN (RMP) REVISION

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Butte Field Office is in the process of revising the Headwaters Resource Management Plan (RMP). Because the new RMP will apply only to the lands in the Butte Field Office area (instead of being split between the Butte and Lewistown field offices as the Headwaters RMP is), the new document will be called the Butte RMP. Land under the jurisdiction of the Lewistown Field Office will continue to be managed under the Headwaters RMP.

ISSUES:

The issues and management concerns are based on the Preparation Plan and public scoping results. Preparation of the RMP affords many opportunities for collaboration with local, state, federal and tribal governments and land management agencies, public interest groups, and public land users. Outreach to the public and other agencies has resulted in some modification of issues and concerns during this process.

Issues identified are: vegetation management; wildlife and special status and priority plant/animal species; travel management and access; recreation (including visual resource management, Wild and Scenic Rivers and Wilderness Study Areas); and areas of critical environmental concern. Other management concerns identified for the RMP revision include: air quality; abandoned mine lands; land ownership adjustments; mineral leasing/exploration/development (including oil and gas); soil resources; cultural and paleontological resources; water quality/quantity; and social/economic concerns.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

In December 2002 the Montana State Office approved a Preparation Plan; in August 2003 a contractor (Tetra Tech) was hired to assist in the preparation of the Butte RMP. Initial public scoping began December 19, 2003, with the publication of the Notice of Intent, and ended February 17, 2004. A scoping report has been completed and is available on the Butte FO website: www.mt.blm.gov/bdo/. As a continuation of the scoping process, a Proposed Planning Scenario was developed and mailed out to over 300 parties with a 30-day comment period in June 2005. Alternative development has focused heavily on vegetation management, special area designations, and site-specific travel planning for five sub-areas within the field office (approximately 50 percent of BLM roads in field office).

Five public travel plan scoping meetings were held in November and December 2004. In summer 2005, community-based working groups were developed to assist with developing alternatives for three travel planning areas. The proposed action and alternatives have been developed and a draft environmental impact statement is expected to be released this winter followed by 90-day public comment period. The BLM made the decision to cancel the contract with Tetra Tech upon completion of two more tasks anticipated to be completed this winter.

The State of Montana, eight counties, and four Native American tribes were invited to be cooperating agencies in this process, but no official agreements were signed. Although agencies and tribes want to stay informed during the RMP process, none wish to be a formal cooperating agency, mostly due to budget and time constraints. The Butte Field Office will work closely with the counties, tribes, public, Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, EPA, and the Western Montana Resource Advisory Council throughout the RMP process. A coordination meeting was held in February 2005, with various federal, tribal, state, and local agencies and to determine any further interest from agencies to be involved with the RMP process. None of the participants in the meeting chose to officially become a cooperating agency.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is moderate to high because the RMP will set the direction for how the field office will be managed over the next 10-15 years. There is growing concern (based on past and current projects) over the management of roads and trails, wildlife and vegetation, fuels, and special area designations.

CONTACT:

Richard Hotaling, Butte Field Manager, (406) 533-7629; or Tim LaMarr, Project Leader, (406) 533-7645.

DILLON RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Management guidelines became effective for the Dillon Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on February 6, 2006, with the signing of the Record of Decision. The Notice of Availability (NOA) of the Record of Decision (ROD) was published in the *Federal Register* on April 14, 2006, which started the 30-day appeal period on implementation decisions (route designations) described in the ROD. This is the last briefing document for this topic.

ISSUES:

Issues addressed in the new RMP are related to threatened, endangered and sensitive species; changes in intensity of uses on public lands; vegetation management and fuels reduction; travel management; special management designations; and the general increasing demand for public lands and resources in the planning area.

Issues that received the most public attention were travel management and route designations; areas of critical environmental concern (ACECs); sagebrush habitat and greater sage-grouse management; westslope cutthroat trout management; oil and gas leasing and development; and wildlife corridors and grizzly bears.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Dillon RMP was developed with broad public participation through a 4-year collaborative planning process. The RMP addresses management for about 902,000 surface acres and 1.3 million acres of federal mineral estate. The proposed RMP and Final EIS were released in April 2005, followed by a 30-day protest period. Seven protest letters postmarked by the May 31 closing date were received. The protests raised address a variety of concerns including ACEC designation and management, travel management, wilderness and wilderness study areas, livestock grazing, westslope cutthroat trout, consistency with local plans, monitoring, and Wild and Scenic River evaluations. With two exceptions, the approved Dillon RMP is essentially unchanged from Alternative B in the April 2005 PRMP/FEIS. In response to one protest, the proposed prescription to manage for a minimum of 12-inch residual tall emergent wetland vegetation in wetland and waterfowl production areas in the Centennial Valley was modified to manage the density and height of emergent wetland vegetation to provide residual nesting cover and concealment for trumpeter swans and other waterfowl without imposing a specific vegetative height. Internal review also resulted in modification to the proposed decision to establish user days by Outfitter Permit area for outfitted big game hunting. Specific use levels will be reviewed and established within 2 years of issuance of the ROD, but will not exceed historical levels as intended in the proposed RMP decision.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Development of the Dillon RMP was Montana's top planning priority to replace the September 1979 Dillon Management Framework Plan. The Dillon RMP was developed with unprecedented public involvement measures that included five scoping meetings, three information fairs, nine alternative development workshops, five informational open houses (following release of the draft RMP/EIS), two oral comment meetings, and numerous presentations, discussions, and briefings with public and agency interests have occurred since the planning process began.

The Western Montana Resource Advisory Council was extensively involved in development and review of the RMP and three subgroups provided recommendations on ACEC nominations, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and travel management. The RAC provided suggestions to BLM during alternative development and review of the draft RMP/EIS. Beaverhead and Madison counties also served as formal cooperating agencies in the planning process, guided by a memorandum of understanding. Both the RAC and the counties involvement have ensured consideration of the diverse constituencies interested in the management of public lands.

Coordination continued throughout the process with federal and state agencies, including, but not limited to, the Agricultural Research Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Forest Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Tribal consultation included the Confederated Kootenai and Salish Tribes of the Flathead Reservation and the Shoshone-Bannock at Fort Hall, Idaho.

Other interests included several national and state-level conservation and environmental organizations; state and local officials, especially at the county level; the local ranching and agricultural community; recreationists, especially hunters; wilderness and wildlife advocates; users in the oil and gas, utility, mining and timber industries; and other state and federal management agencies.

CONTACT:

Tim Bozorth, Dillon Field Manager, (406) 683-8023

MALTA RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Malta Field Office is preparing a resource management plan that will cover the lands managed by the Glasgow and Havre field stations and the Malta Field Office. The RMP will direct the long-term management on about 2,420,000 acres of surface and 3,520,000 acres of subsurface within the three office areas. This plan will replace the West HiLine RMP and the Valley-Phillips portion of the Judith-Valley-Phillips RMP. The Preparation Plan was approved in June 2006.

ISSUES:

The preliminary issues and management concerns are identified in the Preparation Plan and will be expanded and/or modified based upon results of the upcoming public scoping. Preparation of the RMP affords many opportunities for collaboration with local, state, federal and tribal governments and land management agencies, public interest groups, and public land users. Planned outreach to the public and other agencies may provide additional opportunities for identification and modification of issues and concerns during this process.

Through internal scoping the following issues were identified: oil and gas leasing; energy development; greater sage-grouse, prairie dog, BLM sensitive species, and migratory bird management; vegetation management; travel management and access; and recreation (including visual resource management, Wild and Scenic Rivers and Wilderness Study Areas). Other management concerns identified for the RMP revision include: air quality; abandoned mine lands; land ownership adjustments; soil resources; cultural and paleontological resources; water quality/quantity; and social/economic concerns.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Malta Field Office will work collaboratively with the various HiLine communities, tribes, and state and local governments in determining issues and alternatives to address those issues. Scoping meetings are scheduled to begin in October 2006. Eighteen locations have been chosen for the scoping process to ensure the context of this RMP meets the needs and interests of our public.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest will be high because of travel management planning -- roads being opened/closed and game retrieval -- and oil and gas leasing in sensitive areas such as in Frenchman Creek and south Blaine, Phillips, and Valley counties where there is extensive sagebrush communities and greater sage-grouse populations.

CONTACT:

G. Claire Trent, RMP Project Manager, 406-654-5124

MILES CITY RMP REVISION

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Miles City Field Office is revising and combining the Big Dry and Powder River resource management plans (RMPs) into one: the Miles City RMP. Prior to 1998, the field office operated under two resource areas -- Big Dry and Powder River -- and the lands in each area are currently managed under their own RMPs.

The Big Dry RMP area consists of about 1.7 million acres of BLM-administered surface acres and 7.6 million acres of BLM-administered mineral resources. It encompasses public lands in 13 counties in eastern Montana: Carter, Custer, Daniels, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, McCone, Prairie, Richland, Roosevelt, Rosebud, Sheridan and Wibaux. The Powder River RMP area consists of about 1.1 million surface acres of land and 4.1 million acres of subsurface minerals. It includes portions of Custer, Carter, Rosebud and Big Horn counties and all of Powder River and Treasure counties.

ISSUE:

The BLM published a Federal Register notice on February 4, 2005, announcing its intent to plan and conduct public scoping for the RMP. Following issuance of a draft EIS/RMP Amendment for a 90-day public review and the final EIS/Proposed RMP Amendment for a 30-day protest period, BLM anticipates the Record of Decision to be issued in December 2008.

About 200 people attended nine meetings throughout southeastern Montana. Issues identified include impacts from oil and gas exploration and development; lands and realty management (access); travel management and ownership consolidation; vegetation (noxious weeds); livestock grazing; fire management; off-highway vehicles; socioeconomics; and wildlife management.

The Cooperating Agencies and other collaborators met in April 2006 to develop alternative plans for addressing the issues identified during the scoping period. Four alternative "themes" for grouping alternative management actions were developed by the group, including a "local economy" theme.

Cooperating Agencies helping to prepare the plan include: Lower Brule Sioux and Fort Peck tribes; Big Horn, Custer, Daniels, Powder River, Richland, Rosebud, Sheridan, and Treasure counties; Carter, Garfield, McCone, Prairie, Richland, and Wibaux county conservation districts; Prairie County Cooperative State Grazing District; Little Beaver Conservation District; Montana Department of Environmental Quality; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; Bureau of Indian Affairs; and Environmental Protection Agency.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The changes that have taken place in the past 10 to 20 years have resulted in different users and uses of public lands. Issues have emerged that relate to potential threatened and endangered species, increased demand for oil and gas, and changes in intensity of use of other resources. The public lands and resources need to be managed consistently throughout the Miles City Field Office. The RMP will allow BLM to guide management actions based on current information (changes in policy and guidance), sound criteria and public input and provide a comprehensive framework for managing and allocating use of the public lands and resources in the MCFO.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The overall objective of the Miles City planning effort is to provide a collaborative community-based planning approach to assist the BLM in updating the existing management decisions and resource allocations by addressing new data, changing resource conditions, changes in the use of public land that have occurred since the RMPs were completed, BLM planning instruction memorandums and bulletins. The BLM expects that numerous cooperating agencies and collaborators will continue to become involved in this process and will assist in providing a wide variety of data in support of this effort.

CONTACT:

Mary Bloom, Planning Specialist, (406) 233-2852

NORTH AND SOUTH DAKOTA RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLANS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT

The North and South Dakota Resource Management Plans were initially completed in 1988 and 1986. These land use plans cover over 274,000 surface acres and 3.7 million subsurface acres in South Dakota and over 58,000 surface acres and 5.6 million subsurface acres in North Dakota. There will be two Records of Decision from this one Environmental Impact Statement.

ISSUES

This revision is needed to address issues that were identified through internal scoping such as transportation planning, major energy development, forest health, livestock grazing and rangeland health, wildlife, recreation and land tenure decisions. More issues could be identified during scoping.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE

There have been changes in users and uses of public land in the last 15 to 20 years within the Dakotas. In FY07, public scoping of the issues will formally begin to determine the future for the BLM-administered lands in North and South Dakota. Public involvement in this planning process will come not only from these scoping sessions but also through cooperating agency status of counties and several different Native American tribes in the two states.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE

Public interest is expected to be moderate to high because the RMP will set the direction for how the BLM administered lands will be managed for the next 10-20 years. There is growing interest because of travel management planning (roads open/closed and game retrieval) and oil and gas leasing in sage grouse areas or areas of high cultural interest.

CONTACT:

Lonny Bagley, North Dakota Field Manager, (701) 227-7703; or Marian M. Atkins, South Dakota Field Manager, (605) 892-7001

Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument Resource Management Plan

Purpose of the Briefing Document

The Lewistown Field Office is currently responding to public comments received on the Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument.

Issues:

On January 17, 2001, the President designated the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument with a Presidential proclamation. The proclamation recognizes the spectacular array of biological, geological and historical resources found on the approximately 375,000 acres of public land in this monument. The BLM is preparing a management plan to establish guidance, objectives and management actions for these lands and resources.

After extensive public involvement through scoping and alternative formulation, the Draft RMP/EIS was distributed to the public near the end of October 2005. The deadline for public comment was April 26, 2006.

The Lewistown Field Office received 67,454 letters/emails on the Draft RMP/EIS, including 1,825 non-form letters, 17 different form-type letters, and 1 form-type questionnaire. These letters and emails contained about 7,600 specific comments. They covered every aspect of the Draft RMP/EIS, but the most common topics included road and travel management (motorized vs. non-motorized), landing strips, economics, private property, lifestyles, oil and gas, and recreation.

Agriculture groups and individuals along the river or in the uplands fear that monument management will impact their ability to use their private land and/or their BLM grazing permits within the monument. They are also concerned about the federal water reservations in Arrow Creek and the Judith River, and they want to retain the opportunity to use motorized watercraft on the river. The Montana Pilots Association supports the continued use of the landing strips in the monument. Wilderness advocates prefer fewer roads, no airstrips left open, no development on existing natural gas leases and reduced motorized opportunities on the river. Those favoring motorized recreation are looking for extended opportunities for jet skis, seaplanes and other motorized watercraft. American Indian tribes are concerned about protecting cultural sites within the monument.

Main Decision or Message:

Public participation is a vital element of the BLM's planning process.

Bureau Perspective:

BLM will consider all public comments received on the Draft RMP/EIS in preparing the Proposed RMP/Final EIS. BLM anticipates having the final available to the public in the summer of 2007.

Information Contact:

Gary E. Slagel, Monument Manager, 406-538-1950

BADGER-TWO MEDICINE APPLICATIONS FOR PERMIT TO DRILL (APDS)

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The BLM and Forest Service are reviewing a drilling proposal at the former Fina exploratory drilling site in the Lewis & Clark National Forest. Sidney Longwell now holds the lease on which Fina Oil and Chemical Company first proposed an exploratory well in 1983. The proposed well is located at the northern edge of the Lewis & Clark National Forest in the Hall Creek drainage in an area known as the Badger-Two Medicine.

ISSUES:

The BLM decides whether or not to approve applications for permit to drill (APDs) on federal leases. On National Forest land, however, the Forest Service has primary responsibility for surface-related issues while the BLM has primary responsibility for "down hole" issues.

The APD for the well site was approved in 1991 after the Forest Service conducted several environmental analyses; an environmental assessment (EA) was completed in 1985 and a final environmental impact statement (EIS) was completed in 1990. The National Wildlife Federation and six other groups sued the Forest Service. The drilling approval and lawsuit were suspended while the Forest Service gathered information and analyzed the cultural and religious significance of the area to Native American tribes. About 90,000 acres of the Badger-Two Medicine was identified as a Tradition Cultural District (TCD) and having traditional cultural importance to the Blackfeet Tribe. In January 2002, the Keeper of the Register of National Historic Places determined this site as eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The drilling proposal was located roughly two miles north of the current district boundary.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

In light of these findings, the Forest Service initiated an environmental review of new information gathered since the original APD approval decision and a concurrent NHPA Section 106 review.

- **The review focuses on whether the new information has bearing on the decision to approve the drilling, and whether the new information requires a revision, correction or supplement to the previous environmental analysis (EIS).**
- **The NHPA Section 106 consultation focuses on the assessment of effects to significant cultural properties and mitigation needed, if any, to protect the cultural resource values.**

The Section 106 consultation drew the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer, the Blackfeet Nation, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Glacier National Park, the leaseholder (Longwell), and the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States into the proceedings. It has sparked attention from groups and individuals involved in earlier disputes and legal action, as well as the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. During consultation, the Blackfeet Tribe and others brought forward information related to the TCD and its boundaries. This information was significant enough to trigger the need for additional data collection by the Forest Service to address the appropriate boundaries for the TCD. This data collection, primarily in the form of ethnographic study, was completed. The peer-reviewed, final ethnographic report, assisted by the Blackfeet Tribe, has been accepted by the Forest Service. The report recommends additional lands, to the north of the TCD, be included in the district. The proposed well site is now within the area proposed for inclusion.

The Blackfeet Nation is not supportive of oil and gas development in the Badger-Two Medicine area and believes that any development may affect the TCD in ways that cannot be mitigated. Legal action against the Forest Service seems likely on this project. NHPA Sec. 106 requires that the process continue as long as the proposal is active. This process is ongoing.

Concurrently, the Blackfeet Tribe has contracted with a company to conduct an ethnographic review of remaining portions on the southern edge of the Badger-Two Medicine that were not identified in the original report.

The Devon Operating Company has a pending APD (a lease formerly held by Chevron) nearby in the Goat Mountain Area that will require a similar review.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is very high. National organizations are involved, and decisions occasionally get statewide attention. Demonstrations of opposition were staged in Great Falls and Missoula, Montana, following the 1993 decision to approve the APD. Senator Baucus introduced Senate bill 1616 on February 5, 1998, and Senate bill 984 on May 1, 2003, to authorize exchange of existing federal oil and gas leases, including those within the Badger-Two Medicine, for federal

oil and gas lease sale bidding credits or payments due on existing leases. Neither bill passed. In 2006, Senator Burns introduced Senate bill HR 5386 for permanent withdrawal of federal minerals within the Badger-Two Medicine. The bill is pending.

CONTACT:

Don Judice, Great Falls Field Station Supervisor, (406) 791-7789

COAL BED NATURAL GAS DEVELOPMENT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Coal bed natural gas (CBNG) is in the early stages of development in the Powder River Basin of southeastern Montana. Production of CBNG began in 1999 from private and state wells and in 2003 from federal wells. Approximately 525 wells are producing CBNG from federal, state and private leases with all production occurring in the CX Field which is operated by Fidelity Exploration & Production Company.

ISSUE:

In order to analyze conventional oil and gas development as well as full field CBNG development, the BLM and the State of Montana (Montana Board of Oil & Gas Conservation and Department of Environmental Quality) prepared a joint environmental impact statement (EIS, 2003) and resource management plan (RMP) amendment. BLM issued its record of decision (ROD) in April 2003. The ROD and supporting EIS are currently under litigation.

The U.S. District Court has directed BLM to prepare a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) to the 2003 EIS that analyzes the phased development of CBNG. The BLM is currently under a court-issued injunction enjoining BLM from approving any additional CBNG production in the Montana portion of the Powder River Basin.

In order to make the SEIS more comprehensive, the air modeling conducted for the 2003 document is being reevaluated using the most current data and modeling domain. Air quality impacts are described qualitatively when air quality is a low priority public issue, when potential impacts are minimal, or when emissions information is insufficient for a modeling analysis. As air quality issues are of great concern to the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and members of the public, and there are potential effects to Class 1 air areas, a quantitative analysis is being conducted.

BLM published a Federal Register notice on August 5, 2005, announcing its intent to plan and conduct public scoping for the SEIS. Following issuance of a draft SEIS/amendment for a 90-day public review and the final SEIS/amendment for a 30-day protest period, BLM anticipates the record of decision to be issued in June 2007.

Several local, state and federal agencies and tribes are designated cooperating agencies in the preparation of the SEIS: Rosebud, Carbon, Golden Valley, Powder River, Yellowstone, Musselshell, Big Horn and Treasure counties; Lower Brule Sioux and Crow tribes; Montana Department of Environmental Quality, and the Board of Oil and Gas Conservation; Bureau of Indian Affairs; Department of Energy; US Army Corps of Engineers; and the Environmental Protection Agency. The BLM and the cooperating agencies and other collaborators met in September 2005 to develop a phased development alternative. BLM then provided the public the phased development alternative for comment. As a result of comments from cooperating agencies, collaborators and the public, an additional phased development alternative was developed.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

BLM Montana continues to process Plans of Development (PODS) for CBNG as they are received, preparing additional, site-specific environmental documentation as needed. Because of court issued injunctions, Montana BLM cannot approve drilling of CBNG PODs until litigation is resolved.

Monitoring and mitigation are vital for ensuring that the decisions made in the EIS/RMP amendment adequately protect the affected environment. Interagency working groups established for water, air, aquatics and wildlife have been in place since 2003 to monitor effects from cbng development. Working group participants include both Montana and Wyoming BLM and Departments of Environmental Quality; the US Geological Survey; Forest Service; National Park Service; the Natural Resources and Conservation Services in Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota; and Native American tribes. Protection measures and best management practices are in place for several resources including air, water and wildlife. Mitigation measures can be modified based upon the results of monitoring and technology.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

There is a high level of regional interest in CBNG production with most concerns focused on water-related impacts, potential impacts to tribal resources, and the SEIS/Amendment.

CONTACT:

David Breisch, Mineral Resource Specialist, (406) 233-3645

GOLDEN SUNLIGHT MINE, INC. PARTIAL PIT BACKFILL SUPPLEMENTAL EIS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Golden Sunlight Mine, Inc. (GSM) mines and processes gold-bearing ore using facilities located on public and private lands near Whitehall, Montana. GSM has conducted mining and mineral processing activities under Operating Permit No. 00065 since 1975.

When the BLM and Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) issued a record of decision in 1998 for expansion of the Golden Sunlight Mine, the EIS analyzed a partial pit backfill alternative but it was dismissed after DEQ concluded, in part, that the alternative was not considered economically feasible. Environmental groups filed suit against DEQ claiming that the partial pit backfill alternative should have been selected as required by the Montana Metal Mine Reclamation Act.

A 2002 Montana State court decision required that GSM submit a partial pit backfill plan. GSM submitted a Partial Pit Backfill Plan to the agencies December 1, 2003. Montana DEQ and BLM have worked with a contractor and GSM to complete a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) (12/16/2004) to fully evaluate the environmental impacts and mitigation measures associated with partially backfilling the GSM pit.

ISSUES:

The Golden Sunlight Mine is a conventional truck and shovel open-pit mine. Approximately 10 million tons of rocks per year are excavated. Only 2.5 million tons of this total are ore, the remainder being waste rock. Approximately 300 million tons of wastes have been placed in waste rock dumps. The ore is milled using a vat cyanide process. Following processing, the mill stream is piped as slurry to a lined tailings impoundment. An earlier impoundment did experience some leakage in the early 1980s. This was corrected through a series of pumpback wells. This impoundment has been reclaimed.

Because the waste rock at GSM has high potential for “acid rock drainage,” effective reclamation of these wastes is crucial. Extensive monitoring of several slopes reclaimed during 1990-1992 has helped the mine and agencies determine what reclamation practices have been most effective. Surface water management is another critical factor in reclamation success and is an important part of the reclamation plan. Long-term water treatment is an integral part of the mine plan. GSM has posted a total bond of over \$50 million to cover reclamation costs.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

BLM and DEQ have prepared a Draft SEIS which fully evaluates the impacts of the proposed Partial Pit Backfill plan. The preferred alternative in the Draft SEIS is the Underground Sump Alternative with Additional Visual Mitigation. Mine impacted waters will be pumped and treated following collection in the underground sump retained from Golden Sunlight’s terminated underground operations. Comments on the Draft SEIS resulted in a closer look at backfill alternatives. The original preferred alternative does not require any backfill in the pit and is still felt to be the most protective of groundwater resources. We expect a Final SEIS and decision late this fall.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest in the mine is high. Golden Sunlight employs over 150 people and is an important source of revenue for Jefferson County. An SEIS scoping meeting was attended by over 200 people supporting the mine. In 2005 the mine produced 81,000 ounces of gold.

CONTACTS:

David Williams, geologist, BLM Butte Field Office, (406) 533-7655; or Joan Gabelman, geologist, BLM Butte Field Office, (406) 533-7623.

MONTANA TUNNELS MINING, INC. PIT EXPANSION EIS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Montana Tunnels Mining, Inc. (MTMI) proposes to deepen and expand its open pit mine to develop additional ore reserves. This expansion would extend the life-of-mine to 2011.

ISSUES:

MTMI has mined and processed ore from a single open pit mine since the adoption of the draft environmental impact statement (EIS) and approval of the current operating permit in 1986. Montana Tunnels mines a poly-metal bearing ore and produces gold, silver, lead and zinc in the form of metal-sulfide concentrates for sale into commerce. The products are recovered from the ore by conventional milling and flotation processes and gravity concentrating techniques. The mine operates under State Operating Permit No. 00113 and BLM Plan of Operations MTM-82856. It is located on public and private lands near Jefferson City in Jefferson County, Montana.

Development drilling programs at Montana Tunnels have delineated additional ore that extends beneath the existing open pit mine in the pipe of an ancient volcano. The ore body provides a significant resource for mining and milling beyond the current plan of operations. Montana Tunnels proposes to extend its life-of-mine plan to access this resource by open pit mining methods. The added ore resource will lengthen mining and milling operational life by approximately five years. The current mining plan will sustain operations into 2007.

To assure an uninterrupted supply of ore to the mill between the current plan and the mine expansion plan, overburden stripping from the open pit high wall layback must begin in 2006. A major feature of the reclamation at the end of mine life will be the loss of approximately 2,000 feet of Clancy Creek, as a portion of the creek will be encompassed by the pit lake to remain after reclamation.

The consequence of delay likely would mean an interruption in the supply of ore to the mill and possible short term layoffs.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM and Montana DEQ are preparing an EIS to cover the proposed expansion.

Montana Tunnels closed in April while it continued a search for investors after a wall of the open pit mine failed in October. The closure laid off 196 mine workers. The company announced in early August that it has entered a joint venture agreement that guarantees financing for the mine to resume operations and continue permitting for the mine expansion. The agencies will continue to work on the expansion EIS.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest in the mine is moderate. Montana Tunnels has a good history of environmental compliance and has not been a source of controversy. Montana Tunnels employs over 200 people and is an important source of revenue for Jefferson County. More than 100 people, mostly mine supporters, attended an EIS scoping meeting in early 2006.

CONTACTS:

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OIL AND GAS ISSUES IN AND ADJACENT TO THE UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The BLM has prepared a new analysis of 12 oil and gas leases within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument that were issued under the 1988 West HiLine Resource Management Plan (RMP).

ISSUES:

In 2000, the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) filed suit challenging BLM's issuance of three leases to Macum Energy under the 1988 West HiLine Resource Management Plan (RMP) and a pipeline right-of-way. The three leases were issued effective Nov. 1, 1999. MWA alleged that both actions violated the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The leases and pipeline are located inside and outside of the boundary of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. On March 31, 2004, Judge Molloy of the Montana Federal District Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. The ruling essentially said that BLM did not sufficiently comply with NEPA. The clear implication in the ruling was that any leases issued under the West HiLine RMP were in jeopardy.

An evidentiary hearing to consider the remedy pending compliance with the March 31, 2004, ruling was held on January 14, 2005. On January 12, 2006, the District Court issued an order. The effect of the order enjoins activity on the three leases until BLM demonstrates compliance with the directives set forth in the March 31, 2004, order. It also allows the plaintiffs an opportunity to state their position with respect to dissolution of the injunction and BLM's compliance with the March 31, 2004, order. However, at this time the BLM and plaintiffs are working on a settlement to close all issues regarding the pipeline right-of-way. The order also raises Macum's existing \$25,000 bond to \$100,000. The bond has been increased to comply with this order.

Within the Monument, 350 wells have been drilled since 1950, and 56 have produced at least some gas. With the combination of rough topography, scattered development, 320 and 640-acre spacing, limited roads, and remote location, the area has retained its characteristics of outstanding rugged beauty even with the existing gas production. The natural gas areas of north-central Montana are attracting continued industry interest as a result of rising natural gas prices and improved drilling and completion techniques.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Monument RMP was delayed to specifically include an analysis of 12 oil and gas leases within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument that were issued under the 1988 West HiLine RMP. A range of management constraints to protect the Monument is included in the alternatives, including no surface occupancy.

The comments on the Draft Monument RMP are currently being evaluated. Leases issued under the West HiLine RMP that are outside the monument are being addressed in a new RMP for the Malta Field Office, which began with the Notice of Intent published in the *Federal Register* on September 6, 2006.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

While natural gas production and development are among the historic uses of this area, MWA remains concerned about drilling. Other environmental groups/individuals share MWA's position to some extent. Industry has expressed interest in the energy potential of the West HiLine and Malta RMP areas. Suspension of leasing is of concern to many individuals and local governments, but overall, there is a generally favorable reaction for our rationale not to lease until the Malta RMP is completed.

CONTACT:

Don Judice, Field Station Supervisor, (406) 791-7789

ZORTMAN AND LANDUSKY MINE RECLAMATION AND WATER MANAGEMENT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The bonds posted for reclamation and water treatment at these bankrupt Montana gold mines have not been adequate. The mines are located on about 1,200 acres of intermingled private and public lands near the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Phillips County.

After 3 years of environmental review, analysis, and consultation with the Fort Belknap Tribes, a record of decision (ROD) was issued in 2002 selecting final mine reclamation plans. The reclamation plans' cost was more than the funding available from the reclamation bonds and was supplemented with BLM funding. Reclamation earthwork was completed in May 2005. However, funding is still needed to maintain water treatment. Upon conclusion of the bankruptcy process, BLM invoked its CERCLA authority to maintain the systems used for capture and treatment of mine drainage and heap leaching solutions.

ISSUES:

The mine owner/operator, Pegasus Gold Corporation, declared bankruptcy in 1998 and the bonds collected by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) have been funding reclamation (\$29.6 million for earthwork and a \$13.8 million water treatment trust fund). To date, the BLM has provided more than \$6 million and the DEQ has provided \$1.7 million to assist with reclamation, excess water treatment costs, and preparation of the supplemental EIS.

In 1998, the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) set aside BLM's reclamation plan decision and required additional consultation with the Fort Belknap government. The BLM, DEQ, EPA, and the Fort Belknap government re-evaluated the reclamation options and collaborated on a supplemental EIS (SEIS). The final SEIS on mine reclamation was released in January 2002, and the ROD was issued May 1, 2002. The preferred reclamation plans in the final SEIS were estimated to cost \$76.9 million for earthwork and water treatment, or approximately \$33.5 million more than was available from the reclamation and water treatment bonds.

The Fort Belknap government was consulted on a draft ROD. Although it agreed in principle with the preferred reclamation plans, the council rejected the ROD because it did not include provisions for Fort Belknap to manage the reclamation, or funds for certain offsite environmental projects that would benefit the reservation. The tribes appealed the BLM's ROD to IBLA. The IBLA dismissed the tribes' appeal as moot on June 22, 2006, saying because there is no operator, the project is no longer administered under the regulations at 43 CFR 3809; therefore no relief is possible under the authorizing regulations.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The DEQ and BLM are presently managing the site and have conducted reclamation and water treatment activities since 1999. The reclamation earthwork has been completed.

The ROD selected the preferred reclamation plans from the final SEIS contingent upon funding. Of the \$33.5 million funding shortage identified in the ROD, \$22.5 million was required for earthwork and \$11 million to treat acid rock drainage. Due to efficiencies realized through the competitive bid process, and funding provided by BLM's abandoned mine land program, the shortfall in reclamation earthwork funds has been reduced from \$22.5 million to only \$1.7 million (for work on private lands). Therefore, BLM has been able to complete implementation of the preferred reclamation alternatives on the public lands.

One critical item that has been resolved is the funding needed for the long-term water treatment trust fund. This fund is supposed to generate enough revenue to fund water treatment indefinitely after year 2017. The Montana legislature approved a bill this spring that would add to the trust fund and appears adequate to pay for water treatment beyond 2017.

Presently, the short-term water treatment bond provides \$731,000 each year (through 2017) to run the seepage capture systems and water treatment plants. Treatment costs have consistently been over this amount since 1999; and BLM has provided money to pay for the excess water treatment costs through 2006. Now that reclamation is complete, the combined site maintenance and water treatment costs will run and estimated \$1.5 million per year through 2017. The most pressing issue is that beginning in 2007, it will cost an estimated \$770,000 per year over the bond payment to maintain the site and prevent the release of contaminants. This annual treatment shortfall will continue until 2018, when the long-term trust fund for water treatment becomes available.

The federal court in Missoula issued a ruling on June 29, 2004, granting summary judgment in favor of BLM on the trust lawsuit filed by Fort Belknap in 2000 alleging that BLM violated its trust responsibilities. The tribes appealed this ruling to the Ninth Circuit who heard the case in June 2006. In addition, on January 29, 2004, the tribes filed a citizen suit under the Clean Water Act over mine discharges against BLM, DEQ, and a patented (private) claim owner. In February

2005, the federal district court in Great Falls dismissed the tribes' case against BLM for lack of jurisdiction, citing BLM's use of its CERCLA authority as not being subject to review.

With the closeout of the ZMI bankruptcy proceedings in late 2003, the Zortman and Landusky mines are abandoned. In June 2004, the State Director signed an action memorandum to continue the capture and treatment of mine drainage and heap solutions as time-critical removal actions under BLM's delegated CERCLA authority. The CERCLA removal action is being conducted in close cooperation with the DEQ. The BLM has consulted with Fort Belknap on the Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis (EE/CA) that was completed in September of 2006.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Reclamation at the mines is a contentious issue with the Fort Belknap Tribes and state and national environmental groups. The Mineral Policy Center/Earthworks and Montana environmental organizations often cite the Zortman-Landusky mines during debates on mining regulation. Presently the Fort Belknap Tribes and the Montana Environmental Information Center are using the Zortman-Landusky situation as a basis for requesting that the State prohibit permitting any mine that would require more than two years of water treatment after closure.

CONTACTS:

Mark Albers, Malta Field Manager, (406) 654-5100; or Scott Haight, On Scene Coordinator, (406) 538-1930.

BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Blackfoot Challenge, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, is developing the Blackfoot Community Project as a community-based effort to guide the future ownership and management of key lands in the Blackfoot Valley that are currently owned by Plum Creek Timber Company. These lands are being purchased and re-sold by the Conservancy according to this community-driven plan. Some lands will go into public ownership and others to private ownership with safeguards to protect community and conservation values.

Given the strong community interest, The Nature Conservancy and Plum Creek reached an agreement in September 2003 on the sale of up to nearly 89,000 acres in the upper Blackfoot Valley over the next five years. Phase I involves about 41,000 acres for approximately \$30 million. Federal funds will be used for BLM and Forest Service acquisitions and the purchase of conservation easements by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The BLM received \$8 million, the FS \$16 million and USFWS \$2 million in FY 2004, FY 2005 and FY2006 in LWCF funds to help fund Phase I of the project. The BLM and FS have made out-year LWCF requests. The balance will be covered by philanthropic donations and funds generated from sales to private landowners.

ISSUES:

The Blackfoot Challenge, comprised of local landowners, federal and state land managers, local government officials and corporate landowners, has been working in the Blackfoot Valley for 10 years to coordinate conservation efforts in the watershed. The Challenge is developing a disposition and management plan to guide the ownership and management of these lands over the long term, specifically addressing community values for recreational access, grazing, wildlife habitat, forestry, and economic stability.

An important consideration in the Blackfoot's diversity and rural character is that large landholdings in the watershed remain intact. Sixty percent is now in public ownership and the remaining 40 percent is made up of primarily large working ranches or large timberland holdings. Fragmentation of private lands by subdivision and development is a threat to wildlife habitat and the traditional agricultural and rural lifestyle of the watershed. Maintaining the rural lifestyle and protecting the natural resources of the Blackfoot are top priorities for the Blackfoot Challenge.

Community meetings were held in each participating community in the valley. All private landowners adjacent to the project lands were contacted, as some have expressed an interest in acquiring additional acreage. Ranchers with grazing leases on Plum Creek lands were also contacted, and they have indicated a critical need to continue to graze these lands. There was a strongly voiced desire to see these leases remain as grazing areas and to go to public ownership, if necessary, in order to continue traditional grazing usage. The desire to maintain intact working ranches is clear.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

At public meetings, Blackfoot Valley citizens and landowners expressed strong support for substantial public ownership of these lands to maintain historic public access, traditional grazing leases, and high natural resource values. They also encouraged ownership consolidation by adjacent public landowners to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of management activities such as grazing administration, forest management, noxious weed control, and public recreation management.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The BLM is only one public agency expected to acquire some of Plum Creek's acreage. Other agencies include the U.S. Forest Service, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. All agencies are active partners in the Blackfoot Challenge and are committed to collaboration and community involvement.

Senator Conrad Burns voiced support for the project and applauded the cooperative effort required for a project of this magnitude.

CONTACT:

Nancy Anderson, Missoula Field Manager, (406) 329-3914

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET AND PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in February 2000 determined that the black-tailed prairie dog warranted listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but action was precluded because other species had higher priority. The FWS later found in August 2004 that proposing a rule to list the black-tailed prairie dog was not warranted and the species was removed from the candidate species list. The black-footed ferret, however, an animal that lives on prairie dog towns, remains one of the most endangered mammals in North America. The black-footed ferret was listed as endangered under ESA in 1973. In 1994, an "Experimental Nonessential Population Area" was established in Phillips County, Montana.

Throughout eastern Montana, there is extensive prairie dog habitat on BLM lands. Prairie dog towns in southern Phillips County (Malta Field Office) and in southeastern Montana (Miles City Field Office) have been considered for planned black-footed ferret reintroduction efforts.

ISSUES:

The Malta Field Office, under the Judith–Valley–Phillips Resource Management Plan (RMP), has managed prairie dog towns to provide habitat for black-footed ferrets and other associated species, and to provide opportunities for recreational wildlife viewing and prairie dog shooting. The BLM, in cooperation with other agencies, has tried to maintain the abundance and distribution of prairie dog habitat on BLM land at the 1988 survey level within an area known as the 7-km Complex Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC).

The exotic disease Sylvatic plague began to reduce the prairie dog population in July 1992; by 1996, about 80 percent of prairie dogs in Phillips County were lost. Additional plague epizootics (prairie dog die-offs) have occurred across the county, keeping the acres of prairie dogs below the 1988 level. The Malta Field Office in 1998 imposed a voluntary shooting closure on 15 prairie dog towns in areas locally known as the 40-Complex and Pea Ridge, and formally closed them to shooting in October 1999. The Montana Legislature in 2001 passed a law allowing the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to manage the black-tailed prairie dog as a "species in need of management." These two areas are now closed to prairie dog shooting under FWP regulation.

Ninety-five captive-reared black-footed ferrets were released on the 40-Complex over four consecutive years. Six confirmed litters were produced, but then plague returned to many of the dog towns inhabited by ferrets, and animals began to disappear. Only one ferret was found during surveys in September 2006. Due to the poor survival rates of released ferrets and the inability to establish a self-sustaining population on BLM lands in southern Phillips County, BLM did not request additional ferrets for release in 2006.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Conservation actions are necessary to prevent the black-tailed prairie dog and other sensitive wildlife species from being federally listed, and to assist with black-footed ferret recovery efforts.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The FWS, Predator Conservation Alliance, Defenders of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund and the National Wildlife Federation have asked BLM to manage prairie dogs on BLM lands for ferret reintroduction. Other groups such as the Phillips County Commissioners, Malta Chamber of Commerce, and local ranchers have asked BLM to manage prairie dogs based on 1988 survey levels. Region 6 of FWP completed a Black-tailed Prairie Dog Management Plan in 2006. FWP has set acreage goals for prairie dogs and they will assume the lead in working with ranchers in obtaining those goals. The Malta Field Office will continue to provide prairie dog habitat, but will play a much reduced role in reintroducing ferrets.

CONTACT:

Fritz Prellwitz, Wildlife Biologist, (406) 654-5118.

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION IN MONTANA AND THE DAKOTAS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Over the past several decades, the status of sagebrush on western rangelands and declines in greater sage-grouse numbers have been the subject of increasing concern among western resource management agencies. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has received various petitions to protect populations of greater sage-grouse under provisions of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and in 2005 published a “not-warranted for listing” finding in the *Federal Register*. However, the finding also indicated that there was a need for continued efforts to conserve sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat on a long-term basis. This briefing paper outlines the major efforts that are currently ongoing in Montana, North and South Dakota, beyond the specific conservation measures developed as part of BLM’s project-planning processes.

BLM continues to participate in three sage-grouse local working groups (LWGs) in Montana (Dillon, Miles City and Glasgow) established under the final *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana* (led by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP)). Through this forum, Montana BLM biologists assist in adapting the State Plan down to the local level, and in identifying and implementing projects that will fulfill the goals of the conservation strategies (including crested wheatgrass re-seeding projects and noxious weed control in important seasonal habitats). BLM also recently cooperated with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Montana FWP to fund a coordinator position, for the purpose of enhancing the function of LWGs and potentially establishing others. North and South Dakota BLM staffs have also participated in development of plans led by their state agencies. North Dakota’s plan is complete; South Dakota is scheduled to release a draft in early 2007.

BLM is providing support (funding) for various research projects relating to sage-grouse, sage-grouse habitat, and BLM’s multiple-uses management of public lands. These ongoing research projects include studies to measure the impacts of coal bed natural gas development on greater sage-grouse, identify the relationship between West Nile Virus and water produced during energy development, and studies to identify important seasonal habitats.

ISSUES:

Lands administered by Montana BLM currently include intact habitats and stronghold populations of sage-grouse, and as such, conservation here has the potential to benefit the species on a larger scale.

As BLM develops local approaches for greater sage-grouse conservation on BLM-managed lands, the Montana state agency-led Plan will provide the basis for identifying appropriate actions to minimize or eliminate threats to greater sage-grouse, and to maintain and improve existing habitats through projects. It will also continue to refer to the *National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy* (BLM, 2004).

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Loss of sagebrush grasslands in some Western states has approached or exceeded 50 percent, with more than half of the remaining habitat being on public lands. Declines in greater sage-grouse populations are a symptom of the declining health of sagebrush communities. This understanding will be key to ensuring that currently healthy habitats continue to function and to limiting additional habitat loss. Public interest is high because sagebrush is the dominant habitat type in Montana, and conservation has the potential to influence all programs.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The director recognizes BLM’s role in sagebrush habitat management and greater sage-grouse conservation. As a good steward of the land, the agency will continue to focus resources and efforts to conserve sagebrush and greater sage-grouse on BLM-managed lands.

CONTACT:

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GROVE CREEK RANCH -- MEETEETSE SPIRES LAND EXCHANGE PROPOSAL

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Billings Field Office (BiFO) has received a proposal to exchange selected public lands in the Grove Creek area for the Meeteetse Spires, a high resource value and previously subdivided property along the Beartooth Front in Carbon County.

ISSUES:

In early January 2006, Grove Creek Ranch LLC (Larry Semenza) purchased a 568-acre parcel of land commonly called the Meeteetse Spires in Carbon County from RLF Bighorn Properties LLC. This parcel was previously subdivided into 20-acre lots and borders the Custer National Forest to the west, BLM lands in the Meeteetse Spires Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to the north and east, and other BLM lands with high resource values to the south.

On January 24, 2006, Mr. Semenza submitted a formal proposal to the BiFO whereby he offers to exchange the 568-acre Meeteetse Spires parcel for 6,206 acres of public land adjacent to his base ranch operation. The proponent's goal is to exchange the high value Spires lands to the BLM in order to expand his private land holdings of Grove Creek Ranch and eliminate the public land presence adjacent to his private base property. The proponent has also stated that if the BLM is unwilling or unable to facilitate the exchange, he will sell the Meeteetse Spires parcel, in whole or part, to parties currently interested in developing homes and/or a commercial recreational operation (hunting lodge).

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BiFO desires to acquire the Spires parcel to avoid the potential resource impacts associated with subdivision development on private land. This parcel contains all of the elements for which the adjoining BLM Meeteetse Spires ACEC was designated. In addition to a population of the sensitive plant species *Shoshonea pulvinata*, the parcel includes occupied grizzly bear, gray wolf, lynx and peregrine falcon habitat. The parcel also includes a "hanging" or hidden valley with spectacular limestone palisade cliffs and outcroppings and is considered a place of religious importance to the Crow Tribe and part of a designated Traditional Cultural District eligible for the National Register.

No one argues that the Spires area does not contain significant resource values worthy of acquisition and federal protection. However, the challenge is deciding if the proposed land exchange is worth giving up 6,206 acres of selected, blocked-up public land with county road access in the Grove Creek area. Because of the range of property values assigned to the subdivided private land versus the un-subdivided public land, almost 11 acres of public land would be exchanged for every single acre acquired in the Spires area. The BiFO has conducted an interdisciplinary analysis and made several field trips of the exchange proposal. The next step is to finalize the analysis and present it in the form of a Land Exchange Opportunity Briefing to the Montana State Office (MSO).

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Land exchange proposals are discretionary real estate transactions between the federal and non-federal parties. Before proceeding, it must be determined whether the public interest would be well served by the proposed exchange.

CONTACT:

Jim Sparks, Assistant Field Manager, 406-896-5241

MONTANA FUEL REDUCTION PROJECTS IN FY06

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Fires in our public forests and on our public rangeland now threaten people, communities, and natural resources in ways never before seen in our nation's history. Today's forests contain previously unrecorded levels of fuel, while highly flammable invasive species now pervade many rangelands. They do so because decades of fire exclusion policies and other land management actions altered fire's historic role in shaping plant communities.

To decrease risks from catastrophic wildfires, Montana BLM completed approximately 12,000 acres of fuels reduction projects in mostly-forested areas in FY06. The goal was to enhance public safety in the wildland-urban interface, and to improve forest health. Our FY06 fuels budget was just over \$5 million.

ISSUES:

The challenge to completing our prescribed fire projects is largely weather-related -- both short-term and long-term drought. We took advantage of a good spring burn window but the long dry summer keep us from being able to complete our September burns. We were able to meet our mechanical treatment goals for the fiscal year.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Montana BLM is implementing four forestry and fuels stewardship contracts: Fish 2 Heart, LBC Hayes, Roosevelt Ranch Phase II, and Englewood 2 North.

The fuels reduction projects are planned on a landscape level, taking into account other resource management objectives and requirements.

The projects were developed through collaboration with our cooperators. They were completed using a combination of contracted and government labor, and mechanical and prescribed burning methods.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Utilization of the Healthy Forest Initiatives tools such as Streamlined Environmental Analysis and Categorical Exclusions where appropriate will help in expediting critical fuels treatments in the wildland-urban interface.

CONTACT:

Karen Michaud, Fire Management Specialist, (406) 896-2911

HEALTHY AND RESILIENT FORESTS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Montana/Dakotas forests have undergone radical changes during the last century due to the suppression of wildland fires and low levels of active forest management. Frequent, low-intensity fires play an important role in promoting and maintaining healthy and resilient forest systems. Natural fires promote natural plant succession cycles.

Today, our forests are unnaturally dense, and forest ecosystem health has suffered significantly. When coupled with the continued drought and overloaded with fuel buildup, these forests are vulnerable to unnaturally severe (catastrophic) wildland fires. Insect attacks have moved from natural endemic levels to epidemic proportions, further stressing our forested systems. This is a downward spiral that desperately needs to be changed.

ISSUES:

The National Fire Plan, which was adopted in May 2002 by federal agencies and western governors in collaboration with county commissioners, state foresters, and tribal officials, calls for more active forest and rangeland management. It establishes a framework for protecting communities and the environment through local collaboration on thinning, prescribed burns, and forest restoration projects.

President Bush announced the *Healthy Forests Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities*, known as the Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI) in August 2002. HFI focuses on improving regulatory processes and looking for legislative actions to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health.

In February 2003, P.L. 105-277 was amended (P.L. 108-7) in order to provide Stewardship End Result Contracting authority to the BLM. This tool provides the bureau with a mechanism to apply the values of timber and other forest products as an offset against the cost of services received on an approved stewardship project. It also provides an opportunity for multi-party monitoring on the use of the contracting authority.

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) (P.L. 108-48) was signed into law by President Bush in December 2003. The purposes of this act are to: reduce the risks of damage to communities, municipal water supplies and federal lands from catastrophic wildfire; authorize grant programs to improve the commercial value of forest biomass; enhance efforts to protect watersheds and address threats to forest and rangeland health; promote systematic information gathering to address the impacts of insect infestation on forest and rangeland health; improve the capacity to detect insect and disease infestations at an early stage; and to benefit threatened and endangered species, improve biological diversity and enhance carbon sequestration.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Director Kathleen Clarke supports the efforts to streamline the process required to restore the health and resiliency to our public land forests. She states that these efforts will provide for expedited environmental reviews and full public participation processes, while ensuring that the projects are carried out efficiently and effectively. She also believes the collaborative process will help promote partnerships within local communities.

Montana/Dakotas have been making use of the new tools made available to us through passage of the laws and initiatives. These include the hazardous fuel reduction categorical exclusion, expedited EA NEPA, and stewardship contracting authority. These tools have been applied, as appropriate, along with our standard project implementation procedures. Several field office projects have utilized the hazardous fuel reduction CX and expedited EA process. To date, 15 projects have utilized the stewardship contracting authority.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high and is expected to remain high as the efforts to restore forest health and resiliency on public lands moves forward. There is much support for measures outlined in the laws and initiatives, but there is also much special interest opposition to many of the measures.

CONTACT:

William Hensley, Forester, (406) 896-5042

HORSETHIEF HAZARD FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Billings Field Office and Eastern Montana Fire Zone have begun a hazardous fuels reduction project in a wildland-urban interface area west of Roundup, Montana. The area is overstocked with ponderosa pine and juniper and a fire start there would present a risk to life and property. Between 50 and 100 structures are located near the area selected for treatment. The project area contains about 10,300 BLM acres, of which 3,000 are forested. The forested areas are being treated mechanically and with prescribed fire.

ISSUES:

This project is one of the Departments of Interior and Agriculture's "test drive" projects of new guidance issued December 9, 2002, regarding the preparation of environmental assessments (EA) for forest-health projects. It is also a Healthy Forest Initiative project.

The EA for the project was completed in June 2003 and submitted to the White House Council on Environmental Quality for review. Public comment and review period began July 17 and ended August 20, 2003.

The cooperative project involves area landowners, rural fire departments, county government, industry, and the BLM. The BLM and other agencies have funds available to assist landowners with fuel reduction efforts and to help rural fire departments purchase equipment.

The first phase of the project has been completed on 405 acres using a combination of machine methods and hand crew cutting and piling. Indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contracts, which included some local contractors, were used to accomplish the machine work. Fire suppression crews completed the hand cutting and piling. The timber was cut to a specified spacing and the cut materials were placed in decks and sold as saw logs, pulp and firewood. Machine and hand slash piles are curing and will be burned during the winter when snow depths are sufficient. These activities reduced the fire hazard to the surrounding homes and approximately 75 buildings. Timely moisture has allowed the treatment area to establish growth and increase plant vigor.

Phase II of the Horsethief project is well under way on 550 acres in Unit 2, with the completion of severing and decking of larger diameter trees (DBH) of 6 inches or greater. A proposed stewardship contract that would have involved limbing and piling, and removal of the timber product produced by this contract, did not receive any bids. In response, federal crews were used to remove the limbs and pile slash from the trees on these landings and prepare them for winter burning. Wood suitable for use as fuel wood was left and made available to the public through the permit process. Response to the available fuel wood has been excellent and several hundred cords of wood have been utilized by the public.

Hand severing and piling of the remaining small diameter ponderosa pine and juniper has been completed through an IDIQ contract by a small business using local labor. Burning of the piles is planned as weather allows during the winter. Federal crews completed treatment, hand severing and piling, on an additional 140 acres in an adjoining part of the project. No additional mechanical treatment is required on these 140 acres. Prescribed fire will be used at a later date to complete the treatment and restore a more natural fire regime.

An IDIQ hand severing and piling contract has been let to create a shaded fuels break south of Horsethief creek. This fuels break will help keep a wildland fire on the ground and reduce fire intensity near homes in the area. This fuels break will bring the area closer to a more natural condition class.

Federal crews will be working north of Golf Course Road to complete a shaded fuels break and remove hazardous fuels. This unit consists of 100 acres of timber and grasses that lead into a number of homes. Fuels will be cut and the boles left in place for fuel wood permits for public use. These crews will work to reduce hazardous fuels on an additional 200 acres south of Golf Course Road. These areas will be hand severed and piled with the piles ready for burning during winter weather.

Other opportunities are being pursued for use of the wood products including biomass.

In order to maintain the conditions created by the proposed treatment, the area will need to be retreated in 10-20 years.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

In addition to the Horsethief project, Montana BLM will continue to identify projects to implement the Healthy Forest Initiative in collaboration with other federal agencies, state, tribal and local governments, interest groups, local fire organizations, private landowners, and permittees.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Through public comment and community meetings, most residents have indicated support of the project and have expressed an interest in reducing fuels on their adjacent private property.

Some Horsethief area residents are opposed to the project because they don't want the "natural state" of the area disturbed or because they question whether the project will be effective in protecting private property if private landowners don't also implement fuels reduction projects.

CONTACT:

Robert Meidinger, Supervisory Range Technician, (406) 896-5247

EXEMPTION AREA WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The South Dakota Field Office is addressing hazardous fuels buildup in the wildland-urban interface in the Exemption Area near Lead and Deadwood in southwestern South Dakota.

ISSUES:

The Exemption Area, in the northern Black Hills in South Dakota, consists of 22,530 acres that were exempted from the Black Hills National Forest due to the complex mineral survey and public land configuration. The BLM administers federal lands (5,220 acres) within the Exemption Area. The rest of the area is private land.

Within the Exemption Area of the Black Hills are several “communities at risk” including Lead, Deadwood, Central City, Pluma, and Englewood as well as numerous rural subdivisions. There are 2,675 acres of BLM-administered forested lands within half a mile of these communities.

In 2003, the Wildland-Urban Interface Plan was completed and implementation began by treating the Fire Containment Zones – treatment buffers along existing roads or trails that would provide safe access for fire crews – and decreasing standing dead trees in the Grizzly Gulch fire area within half a mile of Deadwood, South Dakota.

Commercial and non-commercial treatments will continue throughout this area to decrease the fuel loading. An additional issue is increased mountain pine beetle infestations related to the close proximity of the Exemption Area to the Beaver Park area on the Black Hills National Forest.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

In 2005, pre-commercial and commercial timber removal began around the community of Englewood. This project involves using the stewardship contract to remove the commercial timber and following up with the removal of products other than logs and slash from 180 acres in the area. In FY07, 90 acres near the Deer Mountain ski area and associated residences will be treated using stewardship contracting. Areas between Englewood and Lead are being marked for stewardship contract during FY08.

The first round of treatments in each unit of the Exemption Area should be completed by the end of 2010 with follow-up treatments of prescribed fire and other non-commercial means the following years.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

This planning process as well as the implementation is a collaborative effort among the BLM, Forest Service, South Dakota Division of Forestry, South Dakota Division of Wildland Fire Suppression, Lead and Deadwood city fire departments, Lawrence County Fire Board, and private landowners.

CONTACTS:

Marian Atkins, Field Manager, (605) 892-7001; Terry Chaplin, Fire Management Specialist, (605) 720-0745; or go to www.mt.blm.gov/sdfo/pages/eap/index.html.

NOXIOUS WEEDS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Noxious weeds continue to spread on all lands, reducing natural biodiversity and vegetation production, and leading to soil erosion. BLM noxious weed-infested lands in Montana increased from about 91,000 acres in 1985 to over 500,000 acres in 2006.

In 2006, the preliminary figures indicate that we will treat about 115,000 acres using integrated weed management (IWM) methods in cooperation with other landowners and managers: This acreage is down from previous years and is due to declining funds and not all aspects of annual reporting being completed. An additional 286,000 acres were inventoried for weed infestations and 183,000 acres were monitored for the effectiveness of the weed management treatment method or methods.

ISSUES:

The BLM's weed management program involves cooperative efforts with other federal and state agencies, universities, county agencies, high school agriculture science classes and private landowners. There is heavy emphasis on using prevention techniques to protect non-infested lands. These IWM programs average less than \$15 per acre for the BLM. In the past, the magnitude of our weed program, particularly our cooperative agreements with counties and private cooperators, exceeded specifically earmarked weed funding in our annual budget. Discretionary funding in other programs that benefited from weed management was used to augment the program, but that funding is also declining, further reducing our ability to meet project needs.

Over the past few years, our budget has remained fairly flat while our cost of doing business has increased. This gradual increase in costs has also eroded the discretionary funding available from other accounts.

As a result, in FY 2007, we will not have the discretionary funding to maintain our cooperative agreements at previous levels. The declining effective budget frustrates our cooperators when the BLM is not able to be a full partner.

The BLM has cooperated in preventative and educational programs including: noxious weed videos, brochures, posters and other materials; certified weed seed free forage programs; biological weed control demonstration sites; IWM tours; and weed workshops. The Montana/Dakotas BLM staff will continue to provide training and technical assistance to various resource and weed management staffs. We will also support and follow the guidelines set forth in the January 2005 Montana Weed Management Plan in conjunction with other county, state and federal agencies.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

We are committed to doing the best job we can with available funding and will work cooperatively with our partners to set priorities. Montana BLM is also committed to IWM, which includes prevention, education, awareness, biological agents (insects and plant diseases), cultural practices, chemicals, physical, mechanical, re-vegetation and the use of domestic animals. To comply with both federal and state law, the BLM will continue to use an IWM approach and encourage all resource management disciplines to participate in active IWM. It is imperative that the BLM and other cooperators continue their efforts or the "weed battle" will be lost.

Weed management will continue to be a very high priority, but lack of funding will inhibit efforts at all levels. There was considerable effort expended by our staff to apply for or assist cooperators to apply for outside source funding. Often these funds will have stipulations preventing their use on public lands which again limits our ability to meet the weed challenge.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Because BLM's weed program is a cooperative effort involving many counties as well as other state and federal agencies, high schools and universities, and private landowners, the effects of our reduced ability will impact our various partners. There is a universal concern about the spread of noxious weeds and efforts to control them. Weed management cooperative groups and individuals will continue to petition congressional representatives for assistance with this problem.

CONTACT:

John Simons, Vegetation & Restoration Specialist, (406) 896-5043

WILD HORSE AND BURRO PROGRAM

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Wild Horse and Burro Program has two primary goals: managing the wild horse herd in the Pryor Mountains; and the adoption of excess animals from the Pryors and other herd management areas.

ISSUES:

The Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 mandates the BLM to manage self-sustaining herds of wild horses and burros in balance with available resources under a multiple use prescription. It also directs the BLM to remove excess animals and place them with qualified adopters. In addition, the BLM is responsible for compliance inspections and titling.

Montana's only free-roaming wild horses are in the Pryor Mountains, about 60 miles south of Billings. These animals are reputed to be of Spanish ancestry, as evidenced by genetic studies.

The Pryor Mountain Herd Area Management Plan, written in 1984 and revised in 1992, guides management of the Pryor horses. Excess wild horses from the Pryor Range are usually adopted at the Britton Springs Administrative Site at the base of the Pryors. Since 1984, the BLM has placed more than 15,000 horses with qualified adopters in Montana/Dakotas.

A total of 54 Pryor mares have received a primer and at least one booster of PZP (Porcine Zona Pellucida) vaccine since the fertility control program started in 2001. Fertility control efforts were initiated with yearling and 2-year old mares in order to allow them a chance to fully develop prior to becoming pregnant. The BLM suspended fertility control on younger mares as a result of increased mountain lion impacts on the herd in 2004. Fertility control in older mares (14 years of age and older) began in 2003 and has continued each year. The intent is to allow these older mares a year or more of existence on the range in better physical condition. The long-term goal will be to contracept these mares for the remainder of their lives.

During the winter of 2004, almost 70 percent of the Pryor yearlings were lost and during the summer of 2004 more than 86 percent of the foals were lost. After aggressive hunter activity in the winter of 2004/2005, three adult lions were removed from the area and no foal predation was recorded in the summer of 2005. Use of fertility control on the Pryor range continues after careful consideration of this natural mortality by mountain lion predation. As a result, 22 mares 11 years and older were selected for treatment in 2006 in efforts to partially suppress herd growth rates.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM continues to manage the Pryor herd for optimum benefits to the animals and the fragile ecology of the Pryor Mountains. We are also working on a major revision of the Herd Management Area Plan which involves efforts from all three federal land-ownership agencies. This revision will incorporate the last 14 years of research and studies on herd genetic viability, use of immunocontraceptive (fertility control) techniques for population control, ecosystem modeling, and updates on ecological site inventories, range condition and trend, and revised estimates of range carrying capacity. We will also continue with the well-reasoned application of fertility control to the herd, providing humane, genetic and population control benefits.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Wild horse issues attract national and international media attention. Local and national groups often get involved in issues surrounding the Pryor Mountain horses. Some groups are interested in minimizing any human management of the horses, some are concerned primarily with the humane treatment of the horses, and some are concerned about the economics of the horse program. The Pryor Mountain Mustang Association and Pryor Mountain Mustang Center both give strong local support.

Senator Burns' proposed legislation regarding wild horse sales should have little or no effect on the Pryor herd. Historically, Pryor mustangs removed from the range have been placed through adoption because of the high interest in the herd. Due to our selective removal policy (primarily removing younger animals) and our use of fertility control to assist with population control, we don't anticipate the need to remove any horses older than ten years of age.

CONTACT:

Sandra S. Brooks (406) 896-5262

Golden Sunlight Wind Project (GSWP)

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Wind Hunter LLC has submitted a major category right-of-way application for the Golden Sunlight Wind Project, to be located in Jefferson County, approximately 5 miles northeast of Whitehall, Montana. The project, as proposed, would consist of a 60MW wind energy development with up to 40 wind turbines of 1.5MW each (or equivalent), a primary access road, an internal road network, and operations and maintenance (O&M) facility, a collector system, a 0.5 mile 17.6kV transmission line, and interconnection with NorthWestern Energy's Butte – Three Rivers 161kV transmission line. Most of the project area would be on the west waste rock dump complex, encumbering approximately 1,100 acres of public land administered by the BLM, with a portion of the project being constructed on land owned by Golden Sunlight Mine, Inc. (GSM). The life of the project is estimated to be 30 years. The wind farm would operate year-round. The proposed wind farm would be built on lands within the current permit area for the Golden Sunlight Mine. The mine operates under an Operating Permit issued by the State of Montana Department of Environmental Quality in 1972 and Plan of Operations issued by the BLM in 1982.

AGENCY POSITION:

Renewable energy development is a key part of the national energy policy. The Interior Department and BLM are supportive of the development of wind energy on public lands. BLM issued a National Wind Energy EIS in December 2005 to help facilitate site-specific environmental reviews for wind power projects. The area is part of the mine's west waste rock dump complex and has been capped and reclaimed, so few environmental issues should be associated with the proposal. The proposed project may result in impacts to visual resources and reclaimed areas. The BLM would work to mitigate identified impacts through the design, construction, and operation of the project. The proponent has contracted with Power Engineers of Boise, Idaho, to complete the associated environmental analysis. BLM WO has assigned this project to Walt George, National Project Manager.

BACKGROUND:

In 2005 Wind Hunter placed three 60M meteorological monitoring towers at Golden Sunlight, two on BLM and one on private lands. The met towers were needed to monitor winds at the site to determine suitability for use of the site for the generation of wind energy. In June of 2006 Wind Hunter LLC submitted the subject right-of-way application.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

No public scoping has occurred to date.

CONTACT:

Mary Figarelle, 406-533-7671, mary_figarelle@blm.gov

Valley County Wind Energy Project (VCWEP)

PURPOSE OF BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The BLM is the lead federal agency in a federal/state cooperative environmental review of a major wind energy proposal in northeast Montana. A Texas corporation, Wind Hunter of Dallas, Texas, is proposing to build a large wind farm about 26 miles north of Glasgow. The wind farm is planned in four phases over about 10 years. Full build-out of the project would comprise some 334 towers of 300-400 foot height producing 500 megawatts (MW) of electricity on a 20,000-acre area of private, state and BLM lands. A 230 KV transmission line 34.1 miles in length would connect to Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) Fort Peck to Havre line southwest of Glasgow. The transmission line and wind farm would involve public lands in all alternatives and phases. In June 2006, BLM and our partners, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Western Area Power Administration and Montana Department of Natural Resources, issued a "Public Review Environmental Assessment" (EA) for the VCWEP.

AGENCY POSITION:

Renewable energy development is a key part of the national energy policy. The Interior Department and BLM are supportive of development of wind energy on public lands. The BLM issued a National Wind Energy EIS in December 2005 to help facilitate site-specific environmental reviews for wind power projects. There are a number of environmental issues with the proposal, including proximity of the project to the Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area (WSA), visual impacts, impacts to wildlife, and impacts to native grasslands which BLM and the other cooperating agencies would work to mitigate through the design, construction and operation of the project.

BACKGROUND:

The proponent of the project has studied the wind resource in the area since 1999, and has picked this site because of the elevation and topography which create the most predictable winds. The location is on a high plateau east of a broad lower plain which results in predictable winds from the prevailing NW direction. The original project proposal was made in early 2004, since that time BLM and the other cooperating agencies have worked with the proponent to involve the public, clarify the project proposal, and develop resource information on the site. Wind Hunter contracted Power Engineers of Boise, Idaho, to complete the environmental studies and to prepare the EA.

PUBLIC INTEREST:

Public meetings held during development of the project were well attended and showed strong support. Letters received in response to the EA ranged from strong local support, based on the positive economic benefits of the project, to strong opposition from environmental groups and individuals concerned with the potential impact to the Bitter Creek WSA, wildlife, and the native grassland. There are also questions on the feasibility of the project, including lack of available transmission capacity to support the full 500 MW project. BLM and the other cooperating agencies are currently working to address these public comments and expect to issue a decision on the project within the next few months.

CONTACT:

John Fahlgren, 406-228-3757, john_fahlgren@blm.gov.

BLM'S DROUGHT POLICY

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Extreme drought conditions over the last several years have impacted most of the West, including Montana and the Dakotas. Current data supports continued concern about the persistent drought caused by low snow pack for the last 5-6 years. The low snow pack, augmented by less than average rainfall, has impacted rivers, streams, reservoirs, springs and wells. This raises concerns for wildlife, recreation and animals grazing on private, state and BLM rangelands.

ISSUES:

Montana BLM developed and issued BLM's first draft drought policy in October 1988. After incorporating comments from the public, academia, Montana Stockgrowers and others, BLM adopted that policy in January 1989. Working with the Montana Drought Advisory committee, the BLM updates it as needed. In 2003, the BLM's Washington Office issued a bureauwide policy to reflect changes in regulations related to drought or grazing.

Field assessments verify and augment data collected from remote automated electronic instruments about rainfall, snowpack, stream flow, reservoir water supplies, and vital soil moisture at frequent intervals. Information from several agencies is summarized and discussed monthly by the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee. Field personnel continue to observe conditions and collect appropriate data. Current data indicates a high concern for most of Montana, especially the southern half of the state.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The Montana BLM's drought policy, supported by the bureauwide drought policy, presents existing laws and regulations used to guide livestock grazing in Montana and the Dakotas during periods of drought. The BLM has provided copies of this policy to grazing lease holders in the three states several times during the last decade.

Under the drought policy, BLM assesses soil moisture levels necessary for plant growth, effective precipitation, environmental demands, plant vigor, and the amount of available water and forage prior to and during the grazing season. Emphasis is placed on allotments having multiple resource values, grazing problems, and a high percentage of federal land. If resource assessments indicate a need to delay livestock turnout, reduce livestock numbers, or close areas to grazing, BLM will work closely with livestock operators to minimize impacts to their operations. Adjustments in fee payments, including any appropriate refunds, will be made on a case-by-case basis. By providing guidance during winter and spring months, the BLM helps land managers and permittees avoid last-minute economic surprises, improve grazing strategies, and reduce land use impacts.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Most livestock operators, Montana Stock Growers' Association, local and state grazing districts, and all resource advisory councils support BLM policy on grazing during periods of drought. Montana BLM is an active participant in the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee as well as local drought advisory committees and groups. When available and applicable, the BLM provides soil moisture and soil temperature conditions from remote automated weather stations (RAWS) located throughout the state. This information, combined with weather and climate data from other agencies and used with GIS soil survey data, assists Montanans in making decisions affecting their farms and ranches.

Montana drought information is available from the state's Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) at <http://nris.mt.gov/drought>.

CONTACT:

William Volk, State Soil Scientist/Range Imp & Range Monitoring Program Lead, 406-896-5029

MONTANA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD (MTARNG) WITHDRAWAL AT LIMESTONE HILLS TRAINING AREA

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The MTARNG has received approval from the Department of Defense/Army to file an application (to be submitted by the Corps of Engineers) to withdraw approximately 20,000 acres of BLM-administered land about three miles west of the Missouri River near Townsend in Broadwater County, Montana.

ISSUES:

MTARNG performed training exercises at the Limestone Hills since the 1950s under special land use permits (SLUPs) until 1984 when a 30-year right-of-way (ROW) was issued to authorize the use. Eighty-eight percent of the range is administered by the BLM, with the remainder under state and private ownership. Live fire training at the range has included helicopter, tank, artillery, mortar and Bradley infantry vehicle gunnery. The types of weaponry ranged from small arms to 155 mm artillery, all of which have been fired into the impact area. Military training over the years has resulted in unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination, particularly within the interior 5,000-acre impact area, though UXO has also been recovered outside that area. In 1993, Army Corps of Engineers (COE) experts determined that the area south of the 2.75-inch rocket safety fan was "widely contaminated" with UXO. Based on BLM policy, the Butte Field Office (BFO) implemented an emergency closure on the impact area. The MTARNG was also advised that its ROW for the range would not be renewed upon expiration in 2014, and the only way to assure its continued use of the area was through a withdrawal.

Continental Lime (now Graymont Western) filed mining claims on lands within the ROW area in the early 1980s and permitted a limestone mine at the north end of the range in 1981. In 1992 and again in 1995, Graymont filed mining plan amendments resulting in an approved expansion of its operations further into the rocket firing fan area. In an agreement facilitated by the Montana Consensus Council, the MTARNG has agreed to clear UXO from the expansion area so mining can continue under the current safety plan. The Butte Field Office recently reviewed a "Safety, Health and Emergency Response Plan" submitted by MTARNG that would allow Graymont to conduct exploratory drilling south of and into the rocket firing fan. The plan has been approved by Department of Defense Explosives Safety Bureau (DDESB). The DDESB must release the area for mining before the BLM can authorize exploration. Graymont is concerned that the current rate of UXO clearance may not meet its exploration needs. Graymont filed 36 additional claims in September 2003 and in early 2006 filed a Plan of Operations to expand farther south into the training range. The Butte Field Office is currently working with the Montana DEQ on review of the plan and will be preparing an EIS on the expansion.

Site tours were conducted July 2002 and May 2005 with the following entities represented: Butte Field Office; BLM Washington Office military liaisons; several members of the MTARNG; the Army COE; the National Guard Bureau; and the plant manager for Graymont Western US Inc.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM is a cooperating agency for the project legislative environmental impact statement (LEIS), which is contracted by MTARNG to Tetra Tech based in Helena, Montana. Public scoping for the EIS was completed, including a working group process. Currently a draft document is undergoing internal review with a draft document for public review expected later this year.

The Butte Field Office finalized an interagency agreement with MTARNG which defines roles and responsibilities. The LEIS will result in BLM findings and recommendations to the WO and Secretary of Interior. The action will require an amendment of the Headwaters RMP, but is being addressed in the Butte FO Draft RMP Revision.

In late June 2004 the MTARNG shared its proposed action with the public at two public meetings and a stakeholder meeting. The proposal is for MTARNG to manage all lands and resources within the training range except minerals. Members of the public who attended the meetings expressed concern with the current proposal. In the fall of 2004, several stakeholder working group meetings were held which have resulted in an alternative to the proposed action that all parties can live with. That alternative will be analyzed in the LEIS.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is expected to be high. The withdrawal would affect PILT payments, recreationists/hunters, and could impact several grazing allotments, depending on how the resource management plan for the firing range is structured after the EIS is completed. There is also potential for the validity of some of the mining claims to be affected by the withdrawal.

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